

REALITIES BEHIND BRITISH "ANTI-AMERICANISM"

The Minority Leading the National Pastime

T. R. FYVEL

THE time was October 1952, the scene the densely packed conference hall of the British Labor party at Morecambe, in Lancashire. The speaker was no other than the former Minister of Health in the Labor government, and the leader of its rebellious left wing. Ostensibly discussing problems of "unemployment" policy, Aneurin Bevan was driving full steam ahead on one of his impassioned lectures on politics to a rapt audience. Now his Welsh fervor had carried him to the subject of the Americans: how they were ridden by fear; how they were afraid of war—and of peace, too, because it might disrupt their production machine. Then came a pause, as if Bevan realized that he had actually said that the Americans were *continuously* afraid. But before he could go on he was caught up by waves of applause rolling up from the packed delegates on the floor, mostly trade-union branch secretaries and local Labor party organizers.

Nye Bevan, speaking for British Labor,

RECENT news reports of attacks on American soldiers on duty in Britain reveal the spread of that strange ailment, "anti-Americanism," from such regions as France and Italy, where it is fanned by a powerful Communist press, to a country which has a minuscule Communist party and is more closely related to us than any other in the world. T. R. FYVEL, a British writer who was for many years literary editor of the *London Tribune*, conducts us here through a tour of the social classes of England in an effort to help us understand this complex and delicate situation, pointing out how anti-Americanism varies in its virulence and character as we proceed from the working class, through the lower-middle and upper-middle class, to the upper class, and finally, that fourth estate—the intellectuals. Mr. Fyvel's last article in *COMMENTARY* was "Wingate, Orwell, and the Jewish Question," which appeared in our issue for February 1951.

telling the Yanks exactly what British Labor thought of them!

OTHER speakers, who tried to present Anglo-American relations in their proper perspective, talked reasonably and intelligently, particularly the former Chancellor, Hugh Gaitskell, and Denis Healey, one of the most effective younger Labor spokesmen on foreign affairs. Yet one felt that their arguments remained too intellectual to touch the emotions of the audience. No one accuses Bevan and his followers of being Communists, yet an observer might well have judged that, while the Bevanites only *disapproved* of the USSR, they *disliked* the "capitalist United States," in some cases passionately.

Yet to conclude from this that Britain's Labor voters preferred the USSR to the United States, and that the next Labor government might switch its foreign allegiances, would be quite absurd—it would mean mistaking a family squabble for a historic split. After all, to the average British Laborite the USSR is an abstraction. It is American loans, free aid, American films, magazines, and comics that are thrust at him, and American soldiers with plenty of money who walk English streets with local girls—as soldiers are apt to do everywhere. Nor are the Bevanites "pro-Soviet." It would be absurd, for instance, to accuse Bevan's lieutenant, R. H. S. Crossman, the foremost expert on Anglo-American "psychological warfare," and a frequent contributor to *COMMENTARY*, of entertaining the slightest illusions about Communism. Over the last year he has followed a "third force" line sharply critical of some American policies. This may be right or wrong—often wrong, I'd say—but it is not "anti-Americanism." Indeed, a point American reporters often miss is that political at-

tacks on American policy and "anti-Americanism" are two quite different things, no more to be confused than, say, criticism of Israeli policy with anti-Semitism. But the phenomenon commonly called "anti-Americanism" most certainly exists; and since it is both complex and highly important at this juncture, it is worth our most careful analysis.

AN overseas visitor seeing England for the first time since pre-war days finds most striking the fact that America is all around him. If he tunes in on the BBC's popular "Light Programme" (with two-thirds of Britain's total radio listenership), he will frequently hear American hot jazz or English crooners (alas!) assuming half-American accents. *Call Me Madam* and *South Pacific* succeeded *Oklahoma!* and *Annie Get Your Gun* on the London stage this spring. On London bookstalls the visitor can see *Life* and *Time* prominently displayed in European editions. He may find English friends prizing a subscription to the *New Yorker*. He will also come across a flood of importations from the sub-world of American pulp and comic magazines, sex-and-science fiction, etc., etc. And he may notice how English illustrated magazines increasingly follow American lines, and how English popular newspapers carry regular New York gossip columns such as Don Iddon's chitchat in the *Daily Mail*—and so on.

Traveling through the English countryside, our American visitor finds America still with him. There'll always be a Woolworth's—even in a staid English cathedral town, together with billboard advertisements for Coca-Cola, Palmolive Soap, Colgate's Dental Cream, Gillette Blades, and all the rest of it. In most English towns he will be struck by the size and central location of the movie palaces, more often than not announcing American rather than English films: Abbott and Costello, Gary Cooper, Betty Grable.

Talking to individual Englishmen or Englishwomen, the American will find them as friendly and hospitable as ever. But he will also become aware of a certain antagonism toward himself as an American, particularly

if—and here is an important clue—he moves in leftist or highbrow circles. This antagonism is something new and goes beyond the familiar Anglo-American give-and-take, or the rejection of the jukebox aspects of American civilization.

Our visitor will catch a plainly jarring note in joking asides about American wealth and British poverty. He may hear comments about McCarthy, MacArthur, McCarran, and McCormick, about Hollywood values and the American treatment of Negroes, thrust at him as though the whole of American life were summed up in these phenomena. A feeling may grow on him, indeed, that in certain British circles no good word on behalf of the United States is ever permitted. Even in true-blue Tory circles he may hear motives, not of political high-mindedness, but of basest commercial rivalry, attributed to, say, American policy on Hong Kong and its Asian trade. He will feel it most strongly—*nota bene*—when reading the columns of the professionally left-wing and anti-capitalist *New Statesman*, *Tribune*, or *Reynolds News*.

Some American visitors may go back with the impression that the whole of British opinion is "anti-American." This is absurd; anti-Americanism—whether measured in emotional hostility and prejudice or political opposition—is much less marked in Britain than in France, or Italy, or Germany—especially Germany. For obvious historic reasons, one can find more genuine appreciation of the United States in the British Isles than anywhere else. Many Americans in their impatience fail, however, to realize to what extent British criticism of American foreign policy may spring from sound political reasoning rather than a flaw in British moral character. If British opinion appears forgetful of American postwar aid, many Americans appear unwilling to appreciate the desperately precarious economic position still persisting in Britain today, or to admit that the question still remains unanswered whether American leadership in the defense of the free world can be squared with wild pressure-group politics in Washington.

Yet, however manifold or various the specific issues under discussion, one basic fact can be seen to be central—the *great transatlantic shift in power*, expressing itself in all the various ways that American influence has been reshaping present-day British life and, in turn, in the various often inconsistent and contradictory British reactions to this.

ON so tangled and complex a problem, one can only hope at this point to suggest a few generalizations. First, American influence in Britain is today most noticeable, by and large, among the working class. It is much less marked among the middle classes, and least of all among the still powerful professional upper-middle class. Moreover, while the average working man, or for that matter the average businessman, may voice a dislike of American ways, there is usually a good deal of admiration mixed in, and he is unlikely to demonstrate that often bitter antagonism towards all things American to be found in British *intellectual* circles.

The most powerful American influence on British working-class life has been through the film. In the great wastes of Britain's industrial towns, the cinema today plays a more important role in daily life than anywhere else in Europe. There was a vacuum to be filled. Two centuries of Puritanism and harsh industrial revolution had almost destroyed the spirit of Merry England. Indeed, on a gray, rainy evening in an English manufacturing town where else can a young worker and his girl find refuge and relaxation but in the warm alluring darkness of the local cinema? And going to the cinema has in most cases meant watching American films, looking at pictures of love-making, success, gangsterism, war, or the Wild West, as conceived and produced in Hollywood.

The British film industry is the largest outside the United States and has over the last decade made notable progress. Nonetheless, British film producers still experience difficulty in filling their official quota of about 25 per cent of showing-time in British cinemas. This is generally put down to a lack of finances with which to compete with

Hollywood's immense resources, which sooner or later seem to attract most British stars. But more than that appears to be involved. British exhibitors and cinema owners have repeatedly shown themselves unwilling to show even the official minimum quota of British films. Perhaps it is because British film writers and directors all went to the wrong schools, or because of the intricacy of British class distinctions, but the fact is that the most successful British films have a middle-class appeal. On the other hand, American film producers—like other American industrialists—appear to have discovered the secret of standardized mass manufacture for a classless market. And the British working classes, who form the majority of cinema-goers, have shown beyond doubt that they *like* the stupendous or stereotyped productions of Hollywood as much as—or more than—the more sophisticated British films that have lately attracted the fancy of a cultivated minority in America.

I believe that when the Labor government, some three years back, was contemplating a severe cut in American film imports in order to save dollars, it was warned that if fewer films were offered in the main industrial areas, the result might well be a fall in productivity. In short, American films have become an essential feature of life in England's factory towns, and especially with the younger generation.

NEXT to films, American popular music has had the greatest impact. If England until a generation ago was *das Land ohne Musik*, this was true above all of the English working class, whose lives were music-less apart from half-remembered snatches of music hall ditties or half a dozen Edwardian tunes like "Daisy, Daisy." Here the Americans can truly say, "We have changed all that." The tunes the British soldiers sang during the 1914-18 war were still written in London, but during the recent one, the BBC saw to it that Tin Pan Alley and Dixieland and Americanized crooners' accents accompanied Britain's far-flung forces wherever they marched. Expert knowledge of swing or

hot jazz is today probably as widespread in the suburbs of London, the Midlands, or the industrial North, as in many parts of the United States. In their Anglicized forms, such institutions as the "rhythm club" or the "semi-professional" dance band exist up and down the country. The old English pastime of square dancing has returned in its hill-billy version to sweep the field, while Lancashire mill girls whose mothers still wore clogs today go jitterbugging.

Though American dance music is played in the London West End hotels, this active interest in jazz remains very much a class phenomenon concentrated in the lower-income brackets. And this is socially significant. During the war, at a time when I was commuting between a British and an American army headquarters, I remember being struck by the fact that in both the American enlisted men's and the officers' messes the radio was going all the time; and so it was in the British "other ranks" ("G.I.") mess. In the somewhat exclusive British officers' mess I visited, this would have been unthinkable. But one should not forget that these officers represented only a small upper-class minority.

To talk of another small minority: on the lowest social level, American influence through gangster films and cheap magazines has produced a new "Americanized" British lower world—those strangely overpainted young girls who used to hang around United States army camps, and the "flash boys" equipped with imitation-American clothes and slang, who in several larger cities have turned a few streets into drab imitations of 42nd Street. It is these rather repellent young people who are apt to catch the eye of melancholy Roman Catholic novelists brooding over Britain's decline, and who have been cited as examples of American corruption. But I don't think this new British subclass is either very numerous or significant, or that its members would have been any better off without American influence.

The main fact, and the important one, is that the new cultural imports from the United States have helped to bring more variety and color to British working-class life: drama, in

the shape of Hollywood films, and music, in the guise of jazz, where there was neither drama nor music before. Is this standardized American drama and music on a lower level than one might wish, and to a certain extent taste-corrupting? It is possible to say "Yes." Yet it remains true that American mass entertainment was able to make its first headway only because British society, shaped and dominated by the ruling classes, did not, apart from sport, include anything in the way of organized leisure-time entertainment for the masses; the British upper class of a generation ago had not, indeed, given much thought to the matter.

AMERICAN influences have, in addition, had a perceptible effect on the whole style of life of the British working class, as well as its entertainment. The women have probably been more affected than the men. The average British worker, whatever his vote, is one of the most conservative beings in the world, essentially still content with his own stylized culture of beer and companionship at the local pub, of horse-racing, dog-racing, and football, betting, trade unionism, labor politics, and innumerable hobbies. Though he probably likes American films and music, it is just as probable that he remains, politically, somewhat anti-Yank. America, to him, stands for capitalism. He has heard about high American wages, about American workers riding in big cars, but all this is far away, across the Atlantic, and he is still not convinced that it has any bearing on his own problem.

The outlook of his wife, however, may already be very different. Some thirty years ago British working-class housewives were mostly still confined to a proletarian or semi-slum existence; their lives were narrow; they seemed to change early in life into child-bearing drudges of the type whose slatternly dress and eccentric grammar provided such a traditional source of fun for the cartoonists of *Punch*. By comparison, the young British working-class woman of today is almost bourgeois.

One must not exaggerate: three decades of

social progress, the labor movement, and the welfare state have been mainly responsible, not America. But American influences, especially the picture of American life as portrayed on the screen, have certainly helped speed and channelize this process. They have helped to teach the British wage-earner's wife and daughter that working-class life today need be neither proletarian nor humble. They have helped to popularize notions of cleaner living and eating, of modern kitchen units, of labor-saving household devices. Visiting the home of a young British working-class couple, particularly in a new housing development area, one is often struck by the Americanized look of their home as reflected in the presence of a radio-phonograph, a television set, a refrigerator, of American-style illustrated women's magazines often carrying Hollywood columns, and in the tendency towards large sofa cushions and tasseled standard lamps rather than imitations of severe British upper-class furniture.

On the whole, I think, these particular American influences have been very much to the good. The young British housewife's admiration for the brighter, cleaner, more classless American way of domestic life may often be unconscious, but it is usually plain enough.

Bernard Shaw once divided all social classes into "upstart" and "downstart." Roughly, one can say that it is the socially upstart classes in Britain that have taken most readily to an Americanized way of life. The British working class, for example, is today very much an upstart class. So, on the whole, is the prosperous business and manufacturing class of the North of England, with its great steel, engineering, and shipbuilding industries. Life in such circles, revolving round business, money, golf, whiskey, automobiles, Rotarianism, and the rest, does not really differ so much from its American counterpart. You can hear plenty of criticism of the United States in British business circles, but it usually lacks venom or the neurotic touch. After all, in spite of six years under a Labor government, the British busi-

ness community has done well enough for itself.

BUT not everyone can imitate America. For the main stream of anti-American sentiment in Britain, the social researcher will have to go elsewhere, to the "downstart" classes.

There is, first of all, the upper class. Ever since 1914, it has been steadily declining in power and money. One by one, the stately homes have been closed. The former conspicuous consumption has dwindled to a fraction of what it was. On the whole, however, the British upper class has so far retained enough of its famous poise and self-confidence to avoid any mood of defeatist anti-Americanism. After all, whatever might be felt about the American way of life, the Anglo-American alignment remains a main political theme of upper-class Toryism, and its dominant attitude towards America has remained one of optimistic concentration on relations with the "right kind of people" across the Atlantic. There are the links with the American rich, with the world of the social pages of the *New York Times* and *Herald Tribune*; Oxford and Cambridge have ties with Harvard, Yale, and Princeton; there are also the ties of frequent intermarriage. In short, if the task of balancing British aristocratic tradition and culture against American wealth has become more difficult, it has not yet become impossible.

But on another level, however, this task is becoming too difficult—namely, on the level of England's professional, administrative, and imperial upper-middle class. For more than a century this class had set its stamp on Britain, India, the Near East, China, and many other places—and, at least culturally and intellectually, on the United States. But today it is very much a "downstart" class at home. Opportunities have shrunk with the Empire. Even senior government servants, army officers, and distinguished professional men are no longer permitted by present price and income-tax levels to lead anything like the cultured, leisurely, and comfortable, if restrained, lives to which they were accus-

tomed. Evidences of the decline of this class are visible everywhere in London. The tall terrace houses of Kensington and Bayswater, the strongholds of London's solid upper-middle class, are today decayed, or subdivided in flatlets, or converted to business premises; the formerly exclusive department stores in these areas now cater to a popular market.

It is among this downstart upper-middle class that I think anti-American feeling runs strongly. It is here one so often hears remarks—about American political clumsiness, MacArthur or Dulles, China and Japan, the latest Washington scandal, or the antics of the latest Hollywood film star visiting London—expressed with a sarcastic sharpness, an unpleasant undertone that betray an underlying resentment.

Such feeling is understandable; it is the old, old feeling of the new poor towards the new rich. Yet anti-American feeling is probably even more pronounced two or three further steps down the social ladder, among what George Orwell called the "lower upper-middle class." This is a peculiarly English class, comprising lesser government servants, under-managers, schoolmasters, and white-collar workers in general. All these are people who have for a long time ranked no higher in income than many industrial workers, but have tried to take their ideals from above and lead the life of public school gentlemen, or at least a parody of it. For the sufferings involved in this pathetic snobbery, see the novels of Graham Greene, or George Orwell's early work, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. Even before the war, English shabby gentility was paying diminishing returns.

Today most members of this "lower upper-middle class" have been forced down almost to the proletarian level, with resultant bitterness. Bitterness against the Labor government whose welfare-state leveling has knocked away the props of snobbery—and bitterness against America, too. Not only because she represents untold wealth, but also because American influence, as exerted through films, music, or magazines, is relatively classless and unconcerned with English snobber-

ies. Thus it is among the downstart inhabitants of the shabby-genteel boarding houses of London that one may well hear the most vitriolic remarks about American wealth, American vulgarity, and American influence in general.

THE most vitriolic remarks—except, that is, for certain circles of English intellectuals, especially on the political left. There is no doubt about the strength of anti-American feeling there—one can sense it clearly in the pages of the *New Statesman*, or in the embittered anti-American writings of a man like G. D. H. Cole. And this intellectual anti-Americanism is too all-pervasive to be explained by any merely political equation of left versus right, or British socialism versus American capitalism. The causes, I think, are much more complex. Here, too, some of them lie in social and economic changes. As a class, British intellectuals have during recent years found themselves increasingly downstart. University lecturers, even at Oxford and Cambridge, have found their incomes less and less adequate even to the bare minimum of decent middle-class life. British writers, no longer able to live on their literary earnings, have been forced into the so-called "half-intellectual"—and sometimes soul-destroying—occupations of advertising, public relations, and the like. British scientists and research workers, too, seem for some reason badly underpaid.

All this cannot be blamed directly on the Americans. Yet the crux of the matter is this: since the war, British intellectuals have seen themselves as an increasingly impoverished and downstart class, while across the Atlantic, American wealth and power have been attaining new levels. And the resentment of British intellectuals appears to have seized upon this. Sometimes the resentment may be focused on genuine grievances. For example, the feverish development of American mass-product advertising seems to bear a direct relation to the newsprint famine outside the United States that has closed down scores of British publications. Sometimes the grievances are less specific. All in

all, many British intellectuals feel genuinely despondent about their future, and the future of their function, and role, in an increasingly Americanized world.

TO THIS, one must add a sharp sense of cultural conflict. The fashionable British intellectual outlook of today is strikingly pessimistic and backward-looking. One can see this expressed in the remarkable revival of literary interest in the Victorians, in the cult of Henry James, in the obeisance before such avowed protagonists of aristocratic culture as Sir Osbert Sitwell or T. S. Eliot. And it is not difficult to see the attractions of this attitude. A British intellectual who before the war was educated at an expensive public school, but now cannot make ends meet on his literary earnings, and perhaps cannot find a creative urge as he sits in what George Orwell called America's "Airstrip One," finds immense comfort in thinking that at least he belongs to a chosen minority who are the only guardians of genuine—that is, exclusive and upper-class—culture.

The *New Statesman*, for example, stands in its political columns often to the left of the Labor party, but it is significant that the literary and cultural values of the second half of that magazine are, without hesitation, those of the upper-class chosen few. And it is these cultural values of the elite, and their ability to cling to them, which British intellectuals feel to be menaced by the tide of Americanization.

The America they see in this connection is not only that of Sam Goldwyn, the national magazines, technicolor ads, ghost writing, and the nihilism behind *Collier's* notorious number on the "coming" atomic war. The conflict goes deeper. What many British intellectuals oppose, dislike, and fear in America is something one might call the capitalist version of classless culture, which has, we have noted, found a large responsiveness among British workers and perhaps already affected their tastes. But this culture leaves no room for the intellectual class's cultural privileges. It is here that the shoe pinches, and it is here that we find the Brit-

ish intellectual standing shoulder to shoulder in a united front of British upper-class culture against the American threat. British intellectuals, of whatever stripe, whether socialists or right-wing Catholics, Richard Crossman or Evelyn Waugh, T. S. Eliot or Bertrand Russell, are strangely but fundamentally aligned, as though they had discovered that beyond all political and religious differences they had after all gone to the same schools—which, of course, they did. Indeed, I have felt about many British left-wing intellectuals that, because they must repress their dislike of the British version of the Age of the Common Man, they give vent to it with all the more vehemence against the American version.

EVEN this sketchy survey, however, may be enough to show how complex a phenomenon is covered by the phrase "anti-American sentiment in Britain." You may have a British workman, a good left-wing trade unionist, enjoying American movies week after week, vaguely aware of American high wages, but politically taking the Bevanite view of America as a rapacious capitalist country. You may have a wealthy British visitor to the United States telling eager American listeners that Britain has been irretrievably ruined by socialism; and conversely, an angry British industrialist writing a letter to the *Times* to the effect that the United States tariff policy is deliberately designed to ruin British trade. You can have a crusty member of the British upper-middle class, say a retired officer or school principal, urging that Britain follow Sweden's example in banning American comics, or impoverished members of the lower upper-middle class explicitly blaming the United States for their downstart plight (it is interesting that the few fragmentary remnants of British fascism, which largely appeal to this last class, all take a violent anti-American line). Lastly, you can find a British intellectual ready to praise an individual American book, poem, or piece of scholarship, but nonetheless giving the cultural conflict of our time a "Britain versus America" twist. What

emerges is that the forms of anti-American sentiment in England shift and change in Protean succession.

WHAT therefore—and this is the question which must interest Americans—should be done about it? Especially since anti-Americanism in Britain is both less widespread and less violent than in countries like France, Italy, or Germany, which have known military defeat and occupation, or in underdeveloped countries like India, where it is fed by the deep-rooted Asian sense of inferiority. Some see the problem in practical terms and urge more American missions and invitations, more lectures, exchange of intellectuals, more joint councils on productivity, etc. Such activities no doubt have a limited usefulness. But it is hard to feel that many Americans as yet understand how far their relations with other countries have become essentially—may I be so bold as to use the word—imperialist.

The word "imperialist" is one, of course, that most Americans would indignantly reject. And it is true that the new American imperialism (like Soviet imperialism in its own certainly less sweet way, for that matter) has not followed the classical West European pattern of conquest, occupation, and rule through mixed European and native colonial administrations. It is also true that most Americans never wished for their present imperial responsibilities. But this is beside the point—the British Empire, too, was

largely created in a fit of absent-mindedness. When one looks at the network of American military bases stretching from Seoul to Suffolk, at the whole system of American military and economic aid, of military, financial, and technical missions, and of economic and cultural exports from Coca-Cola to comics, it is clear that something like an "American imperial sphere" has indeed sprung up—or an "American sphere of responsibility," if one dislikes the word "imperial" and shuns the concept of Empire.

Many Americans, to be sure, still imagine fondly that this international responsibility can be shed tomorrow or the day after. But it is most unlikely. And if one accepts this fact, one must accept its consequences, one of which is that, as the new imperial overlords, the Americans have inherited much of the unpopularity of the British in their great imperial period. (Which, incidentally, was also the period when they were rendering the world a distinct service by maintaining the *Pax Britannica*. For a parallel to the international dislike of General MacArthur one need go back only half a century, to the Boer War and the violent anti-British feeling it aroused in its day.) The problem of coping with such unpopularity is not easy. But if the problem is to be tackled, the power realities of leadership and dependency behind it must be clearly understood; then we may be able to decide whether it is possible to mitigate in some way the emotional consequences of Britain's loss of power.